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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the effects of feminism on educational policy in Australia and the role of feminist educators in developing and implementing the feminist agenda. It also examines the conditions framing Australian feminist work in education. The essay reviews the gains that girls and women have made in educational attainment and employment, as well as the challenges that remain. The paper goes on to examine Australian feminism's engagement with the state, focusing on the increasing role of feminists within government and policy-making bodies and the development of feminist theories. It then discusses macro-state agendas, such as economic rationalism, educational equity, and teacher education. The paper also reviews micro-political issues, such as feminist reform through regulation and accountability, naming and visibility issues, and the problems created by the growing "sophistication" of feminism in Australia. (Contains 38 references.) (MDM)

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Feminism's fandango with the state revisited

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This paper arises from a recent commission to write an overview essay on feminism and education in Australia for a general audience, as part of a volume on Australian Feminism, and from my difficulties in doing this. (*Caine et.al., forthcoming 1998; Yates, forthcoming 1998b)* Which of many stories does one tell? Whose stories does one tell? How does one assess what has happened, what has been achieved? It is located too in the context of a burst of millenial attempts to take stock. Both in the media and in academic conferences, articles and books, there is now a burgeoning discussion about what feminist movements and agendas have been doing in education; what their effects have been, whether they have gone too far... (*Elgqvist-Salzman et.al., forthcoming 1998; Yates, 1997)* This paper is one set of reflections on these issues. In it, I try to say something about the shape of *Australian* feminist activity in education, and also to reflect on some broader issues regarding directions in feminist theorizing and politics.

The Fandango Mark 1

The title of my paper refers to an earlier article written by Sara Dowse, a one-time head of the federal Office of Women's Affairs in Australia (*Dowse, 1983)*. In an article published in 1983, Dowse discussed the women's movement's relation to and effects in public policy-making in the previous decade. In it, she showed that, for a number of reasons, the women's movement and women's issues began to make some impact on politicians and policy agendas during this time, but she also raised a number of issues about the form and directions this was taking.

- At a macro-political level, she pointed to the tendency to take up women's issues only in areas self-consciously concerned with 'social' policy, rather than in the broad spheres of government that affect economic issues and production.

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- At a micro-political level, she discussed how the location and power of the women's unit had shifted, had risen and fallen, as a side-effect of political manoeuvres by politicians and senior bureaucrats concerned with quite other agendas.
- In terms of substantive issues and feminist strategy, she discussed how, over the course of two years in the mid-70s, almost all the energies of women's groups (at least in the public policy sphere) had been occupied with claims and debates about the allocation of a $2.2 million dollar fund set up by the government to celebrate International Women's Year; while they had little effective impact on decisions about the allocation of a $75 million dollar allocation pledged for child-care, but which was primarily used for pre-school education.
- Finally, she argued that the women's movement's attempt to fight on a broad range of issues was weakening its power politically, and that it would be better to focus on agreed priorities (as had feminism earlier, in obtaining the vote). The priority she would nominate was child-care.

The 80s and 90s

A lot has happened since Dowse was writing in 1983. In Education, a range of inquiries, policies, regulations, legislation have forced school systems and universities to give some attention to girls and women, to attend to discrimination in access and promotion, to address sexual harrassment. Government funds have been used to support 'equal opportunity' units, resource centres, research projects, professional development of teachers and curriculum materials related to women. Girls' subject-choices and participation rates in school have shifted, and they have notably increased their presence in undergraduate education and in the study of medicine and law.[1] Avowed feminists have been appointed to senior positions in

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[1] Equally, this is only part of the 'facts and figures' story: Girls' retention in school passed that of boys in 1976, and now shows a gap in their favour of around 10%; women's participation in higher education passed that of men in 1988; the proportion of women with post-school qualifications increased from 26% in 1982 to 37% in 1992; there has been a marked increase in women's participation in the prestigious fields of medicine and law. But the changes need to be seen in context. There is still a marked imbalance in entry to trade apprenticeships, and this accounts for some of the disparity in school retention (that is, boys have other options for entering work). Women's rising participation in higher education in part is an artefact of a redefinition of that sector to include nursing and all teacher education - and women continue to be a minority of postgraduate students. Though the proportion of women with post-school qualifications increased to from 26% to 37% in the decade to 1992, in the same period that for men increased from 38% to 47%.
In terms of education, feminist reforms have had most effect in schools and on undergraduate university participation, and least effect in the technical and further education sector. Some specific schemes have been enacted to address the latter, such as the Australian Trainee System, begun in 1985, but there is still a noticeable sex-typing of courses in areas such as engineering, trade subjects, secretarial studies, nursing, agriculture. Changing educational patterns need to be read against changing labour force structures, and women's formal improvement in educational qualifications has not been matched by an equivalent equalizing of income and career success, though it has contributed to some improvement in relative patterns

some education departments and to head some institutions. In academia, feminists are no longer a small and marginal voice in the education research community, but are a noted feature of it. Indeed, so much has happened that there is now a prominent discussion about boys and men as a disadvantaged group *(for more details see Burton, 1997; Kenway et.al, 1996; Yates, 1997; Yates, forthcoming 1998a)*

A lot too has happened in terms of the types of issues feminist researchers are discussing, and the types of theories they are working with. Dowse was writing at the tail-end of a period where the central debates were about who had the right analysis: who had found the key to women's oppression, who had the right strategy, were liberal feminist or socialist feminist or radical feminist visions the way to go? Now we find a more intense interest in the inevitability and irreducibility of multiple stories; in 'discourse' and 'identity' and 'subjectivity'; in the dangerousness of feminist projects *(for example, Gore, 1992; McLeod,1993, 1995).*

In my essay for the Australian feminism project, I began by talking about whose stories we might talk about, and the different stories we might tell, but did finally attempt the unfashionable task of overview, of saying something about what it all adds up to. I concluded in this way:

> *The story of feminism and education in Australia in the late 20th century is one of achievements and also of ironies. Girls' and women's participation in education has increased markedly in most areas, and, both as students and as employees, they have achieved significantly more success than at any other time. Yet the content of some feminist agendas here has contributed to a diminishing of the status of education as a field of work, and of other occupations and concerns in which many women are involved. Feminist researchers in education have produced a large output of writing which has received international attention and recognition as a significant new development in its own field. Yet one outcome of this very large body of work has been to make the achievement of feminist hopes in education seem more complex and less achievable than it did two decades ago. Feminist interventions have produced a formal acceptance of equal rights for women to enter all fields of education; they have generated new debates about single-sex and co-education, about sexual harassment, about assessment and entry policies; but they have produced a less consistent message for educational practice*

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in these areas. (Yates & Leder, 1996) In education itself, reforms have made it possible for more women to achieve promotion and senior positions, but, overall, in school systems, in private schools and in universities, the shape of the hierarchy which has women disproportionately filling the most junior ranks, and men disproportionately filling positions of authority retains its basic form.(Bacci, 1993; Milligan et.al., 1994; Burton, 1997)

about the ways in which gender should be addressed as an issue in the content, teaching and institutional forms of education. For all that, in few countries have feminist issues been heard so widely in education as they have in Australia, and initiatives, reforms and research produced in this country have been widely influential.

(Yates, forthcoming 1998b)

In the remainder of this paper I want to say more about these issues and judgements by considering them against Dowse's earlier discussion. The paper also I think owes something to older discussions about materialism and the ways the conditions in which we work affect what is thought and achieved; as well as to certain more recent types of discussion, influenced by Foucault (to see power not just as negative but as effecting, to understand that everything is dangerous) and to a concern about contemporary politics and education (how does one take stock and how does one engage with where we are now?).

Australian feminism's engagement with the state:

...in few countries have feminist issues been heard so widely in education as they have in Australia, and initiatives, reforms and research produced in this country have been widely influential...

Compared with most other countries, the involvement of feminists in education in Australia has been notable both for its scale and its form - and the two are linked. Compared with other countries, what has been interesting about the Australian feminist activity in education is its thoroughgoing engagement with the state to bring about reforms - and, simultaneously, its maintenance of a vigorous reflexive and critical theorizing about these engagements. What is distinctive here is the conjunction of the two. Feminists who have engaged in radical critiques of the state are very likely to be consulted by one of its branches concerned with reform, and, at some point in their lives, to either be employed by the state to do feminist work, or to receive some funding support for work they have begun themselves. Equally, feminists who work for the state are regular participants in feminist associations and feminist conferences: these 'femocrats' are voices in the utopian and political exchanges which in other countries are often the province of the outside critic. As Hester Eisenstein noted about her experience in coming from the USA to take up just such a position in Australia:

For me, what was striking about the femocrats was their undisguised commitment

to feminism, and the acceptance of this within the bureaucracy. These were not a generation of women who, to win senior positions in government, had had to conform to the reigning ethos and disguise their personal convictions.

(Eisenstein, 1991, p.13; and see also Franzway, Court and Connell, 1989; Blackmore and Kenway, 1993)

The material conditions of funding and jobs, both inside and outside universities, have been one source of the significant scale of feminist work in Australia over the past two decades, and have shaped a type of feminist discussion of which both Dowse's and the present paper are examples. One of the most distinctive features of much Australian feminist writing in education is its ongoing discussion about itself, its intense interest in the politics and effects of feminist reforms in education, its widespread engagement with feminist issues linked to an intense scrutiny of changes, achievements and problems; its development of a more refined discussion about policy and theory/practice issues than in other countries. (Examples include *Alloway, 1995; Blackmore & Kenway, 1993; Davies, 1989; Franzway and Lowe, 1978; Foster, 1987, 1994; Kenway, 1990; Kenway, Willis & Junor, 1996; Luke and Gore, 1992; McLeod, 1993; Tsolidis, 1993; Yates, 1985, 1993a,b; Yeatman,1990* and many more. To my knowledge, all except two of those listed (including myself) have taken on some form of consultancy or report for government at some point, and most have done so on more than one occasion - and I don't know about the remaining two.)

The work of these people is shaped at least in part by the fact that there have been jobs and funding which have enabled them to work specifically on this area over a number of years; by the fact that they have each other - that is, a weight of numbers to talk to each other at conferences. Part of the style of work developed is that so many feminists in education experience (as a result of funding and consultancy options) the requirements of speaking to and addressing policy and bureaucratic concerns and elsewhere experience the requirements of proving their academic worth by taking part in conferences of intellectuals, and elsewhere again experience the force of being held to account in grass-roots associations. It is not that this conjunction is unknown by feminists in other countries, but it is a more regular and highly developed phenomenon in Australia. And the extent to which Australian feminists of all persuasions have attempted to bring about change by centralized regulation, legislation and becoming part of those directing political bodies, has been striking.

I also think the conditions of Australian feminism help explain certain emphases in academic feminist theorizing. These emphases are certainly not confined to Australia, but I would argue that they have been stronger in Australia than elsewhere. Firstly, in the 1970s in particular, feminist work and feminist projects in education I think paid more attention to working class girls than in many other places (I am talking here specifically about the *initial* burst of feminist research and reform activity in relation to schools), and in this reflected the strong labour traditions in Australia (being rapidly demolished in the period that followed); the fact that many of the feminist working in education in the 70s came to it through experience in and disenchantment with the teacher union organizations; and the fact that many of the leading Australian feminist academics in the 70s were associated with labour history.

More recently it seems to me that poststructural frameworks have been taken on more pervasively and vigorously by feminists in Australian academia than just about anywhere else. Why is this? One answer might be related to the conditions I've already referred to - that significant numbers of women academics have now been working solidly on feminist issues for well over a decade, and have been following it through to more complex ways of seeing. Another factor might relate to Australia and Australian academia's positioning in the world. (This reflection has been prompted by some recent discussion in my reading group about postcolonial theory and analyses, and whether and in what ways Australia could be seen as a postcolonial country (we were discussing *Williams and Chrisman, 1993 who are critical of including countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada in these discussions).*

Although there are a few exceptions, Australian feminist work in education is still dominated by white women of anglo-celtic ancestry. Their (our!) native language is English, and their intellectual roots are in western intellectual traditions. But their experience is also that of a periphery/colony rather than a centre/metropolis. For example, in Australia for a long time, women were doubly disadvantaged in gaining university appointments because there was such emphasis placed on the value of qualifications outside Australia and women had less opportunity and resources to travel to obtain these than did men. (*see Gale, 1980*. This emphasis has changed only marginally, but more women are now managing to travel rather than simply follow a spouse's needs.) Academic recognition and promotion still rests very heavily on one's participation, achievements and publication *outside* Australia. In these conditions there is some incentive to seek to engage in the new theories achieving prominence

in international journals, as well as to be drawn to theories which disrupt single and linear accounts: for the experience of white feminists in Australia both is and is not that of white feminists in the USA and the UK. Although Australian academic feminist work in education is itself now widely noted outside Australia, in this work, the claims of star post-colonial theorists in the USA and UK are still more widely noted than local minority feminist writing, or the particular claims of the marginal and colonized groups within Australia. (Here I think the feminist work in New Zealand is distinctly different from Australia, and the discussion of Maori experiences and colonizer relations more central in the feminist agenda.)

Feminism and macro state agendas:

Dowse's concern about the taking up of women's issues only in areas already marked out as 'social' policy is a very relevant one. The most notable development in Australian politics and state policy over the past two decades has been the dominance of what in Australia has been called 'economic rationalism' as an over-riding framework of government as well as business activity. (*Pusey, 1991; Marginson, 1997*) When there is an emphasis on 'economic efficiency', when institutions are measured by how few workers they can employ, or how much work each worker can be made to do (for example in terms of teacher/student ratio), when public institutions such as schools and universities are required to find their own funding for a greater proportion of their operations, then the operations of 'equity' mechanisms assume a more marginal role, even before there is any explicit withdrawing of funding for this.

Most universities today have some form of equity unit; and all of them are required to account to the government for their processes and outcomes of promotion and student intake in relation to gender. But the broader intensification of competition for jobs and the undermining of tenure have made it difficult for women or men to limit or manage their working arrangements appropriately to maintaining family life; the focus on teaching, research and consultancies that earn money; the imposition of new fees for the graduate courses that attract many women[2], all work to re-shape the emphases of universities away from issues which women and feminists have seen as important.

[2] The government's rationale is that graduate coursework programs are 'professional' training that should be funded by employers. This is little comfort to those wanting to do a Women's Studies degree; nor to teachers in government schools, since their own employer (the state government) has not been convinced of the commonwealth government's views on this matter.

In relation to schooling, a recent survey has found that schoolteaching is now one of the least desired jobs in the country, and in my own current longitudinal study with Julie McLeod, which is following students at four schools through each year of their schooling, five years into the project, not one student is expressing a desire to be a teacher. This status and perception of teaching certainly owes something to the reduction in teachers' material conditions of work in recent years. However for young people, it may also have been influenced by the visible, feminist-influenced and government-sponsored policies and projects to persuade girls to achieve in mathematics, to aim at different careers, to focus on personal success. Here is an example of the 'fandango' (and what difference would it make to call it 'capillary power'?) in which feminist educational reform is inevitably enmeshed. Across a wide variety of shades of feminism it seemed appropriate in the late 20th century to argue that girls should have a better opportunity to succeed in the workplace through access and encouragement in education. To a wide range of feminist researchers, it seemed relevant to convey the understanding that subject choice and achievement in mathematics was the result of social and educational processes, not of innate biology. These agendas found fertile ground in state policy and in public discourse because they fitted with broader agendas for education or for capitalism. Yet the very success of these projects tends to strengthen beliefs that other types of knowledge and their associated occupations are less important, less difficult, require less reward.

Micro-political issues

(i) *Reform via regulation and accountability:*

Just as Dowse identified the micro-political purposes of government departments and individuals as influencing the fluctuating strength of the femocracy, in other papers I have argued that a key element of the formalizing and visibility of a policy for girls in schools in Australia was its usefulness in extending the power of the federal government over the state governments. (*Yates,1993a,b)* In tertiary education it has been a useful means of bringing in university to a system more tightly controlled to the political purposes of the central government. How do we assess this fandango? Gaby Weiner has argued that, in the UK, the latter processes of accountability, notwithstanding their overtly repressive form, have served women better than the older, 'liberal' and 'self-regulating' universities.(*Weiner et.al., 1997; Farish et.al, 1995*) Or we could identify ways in which these mechanisms effect a range of

possibilities in different context. (*eg Burton, 1997; Farish et.al, 1995; Arnot et.al, 1996; Kenway et.al, 1997*)

(ii) Naming and visibility issues:

Dowse identified some effects of IWY funding in the 1970s: it was a highly visible sop to feminist concerns; it occupied a lot of energy and was a source of division between feminist groups; and it focussed a lot of attention on a very tiny part of the overall funding program of government. On the other hand, in my own PhD (*Yates,1986*), which was specifically concerned with developments and policy in Education, I argued that the significance for the government of wanting to be seen to be doing something in this international context, did produce a means whereby the previous lobbying by many different groups was brought to have some more general impact in education (through an inquiry and through tagged funding allocations).

Similar points might be made about much of the way that gender issues or feminist issues have been taken up in education more generally. Very frequently this has been done through special, named policies; special named units; special regulation. These have served as an enabling and indeed employment base for many women who want to work on feminist issues in education. But, in form these have then been highly visible as developments, likely to feed an exaggerated general perception of the attention that has been given to gender issues. Overall, we can point to 'effects' of both kinds. Notwithstanding the 'political correctness' debate, there is evidence that the developments (along with broader cultural shifts) have led to a shift in students' and teachers' baseline expectations about the rights and possibilities of women in education: mathematics, medicine, law are no longer seen as unusual subjects for women to study; girls believe, consciously at least, that they are equal and have equal rights to boys. But there is also evident a considerable resentment of 'women's' initiatives, and numerous indications that it is shaping (with unfortunate consequences) the way boys' and men's issues are now being taken up (*Yates, 1997*).

(iii) Problems of 'sophistication' and expertise:

Finally, because of the range of initiatives set up, many people have now been working specifically on gender issues for some time, and this can create its own problems. At a National Conference on Gender Equity in Canberra in early 1995 attended by around 200

invited participants from education departments, parents' organizations, universities, and representing people who had been seriously engaged in this area for some time, there was considerable sophisticated discussion of poststructuralism, a taken-for-granted understanding not to talk about 'girls' as a unified phenomenon, concern about homophobia, and so on. Meanwhile, in schools, teachers were facing such funding cuts and increased work pressures that in many cases it was felt that any attention to gender issues was a luxury. The 'professionals' have become concerned with subtle and complex issues affecting the possibilities of change via education: the workings of desire as well as of 'rational' ambitions; the differences of race, ethnicity, class; the cultural 'discourses' which regulate current possibilities. These are much more difficult issues to attract support for, and to give a practical form to, than some some earlier claims about restricted access, biased representation of women, encouraging female students and their teachers to aim higher.

Feminism's Fandango with the State Revisited:

In this paper I have been trying to say something about the conditions framing Australian feminist work in education, and to pick out some aspects of the form of that work; to talk about what is being effected as multiple and multiply-directioned, and not as a single and uni-directional project or set of ideas and practices; but nevertheless, to raise again, implicitly at least, the issue of feminist strategy in education. Where should we go from here?

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